

Narrator:

This is an America.gov podcast. For print versions of articles, multimedia, and subscription information, visit www.america.gov.

In May 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would host a conference on women and entrepreneurship as part of the Pathways to Prosperity in the Americas initiative. The Pathways initiative links together countries in the Americas to identify policies and programs that ensure all citizens share in the benefits of economic integration and globalization. The conference was called Access, and it brought together aspiring women entrepreneurs from across Latin America to Washington from October 7th through October 9th.

Now, several of the conference's participants share their views on the conference, the challenges women face as entrepreneurs, and the value of mentors.

Access – the women entrepreneurs conference held in Washington in October 2009 – launched a network that connects women entrepreneurs from across the Western Hemisphere. Supporting these businesswomen provides a multiplier effect for not only those businesses, but also for their communities and the entire region.

Maria Pacheco:

My name is Maria Pacheco, and I'm from Guatemala. I own a company called Kiej de los Bosques.

Narrator:

Pacheco is one of many conference participants who came to Washington to help launch the network. Like many entrepreneurs, she brings a conviction and passion to her work that goes beyond simply running a business.

Maria Pacheco:

Like every entrepreneur, I have a dream, and mine is to really see communities all over the world living happy, making their dreams come to life, surrounded by beautiful environments and a place where there's harmony all over the world. But also I was born in Guatemala together with the war. For me, it's like this dream has been the direction where I want to go, but the starting point has been rural communities in Guatemala, especially women that had to bury their children because there was a war, bury their children because they were poor. There was no access to things, and when you see that pain, you really – for me it was saying I do not want to live in a country that allows this. At the beginning it was fighting it, and now it's just learning that there's ways— beautiful ways — to transform reality, and those have to do with people working together. And that's why we're so excited to meet amazing women from the region, but amazing women from the States here as well.

Marcela Echavarria:

Marcela Echavarria, and I'm from Colombia. I am in the business of embracing sustainability in the luxury market through finding artisans that have beautiful traditions, ancestral traditions, and finding markets for them from a showroom that we have in New York and, through their products, expressing their culture and keeping it alive.

Narrator:

Echavarria is a living example of how taking a chance and presenting your ideas, even with no guarantee of success, is the very essence of entrepreneurship.

Marcela Echavarria:

Basically I went to school here and studied history and literature, and I wanted to write. And I went back to Colombia after graduating in '95, and I wanted to write about things that the world is losing – traditions, food. And then I was teaching a seminar that UNESCO was organizing in Catacaos, Peru, which is a town known for its filigree, and it had people from five different countries — five Andean countries — a combination of artisans and designers. They were just doing beautiful, beautiful, beautiful work and I thought, you know, those products – where are they going to end up? Because the market for filigree is really very niche. They're going to end up probably in the warehouse of UNESCO in Paris or who knows. So I went to the

Internet cafe in the town and I wrote four emails — info@donnakaran.com, info@ralphlauren.com — “Hi, my name is Marcella Echavarria, and I have this idea; I think the exchange between talent, knowledge and economic power between the North and the South should be balanced differently, and I have this idea called SURevolution.” It's about taking the risk — jumping into the pool, and you don't know if even if it has water. Then you figure it out — you figure out the rest.

Janet Cronick:

How did I decide to become an entrepreneur? Well, I came from the corporate world. My background is in human resources, and after 12-plus years I was ready to follow in the footsteps of my father, who had his own business — originally from El Salvador, came to the U.S. when the civil war broke out in El Salvador, and the family relocated to the U.S. — and I've always wanted to follow in his footsteps.

Narrator:

The women at the Access conference came from many different backgrounds. Janet Cronick has a background in business. But, as she explains, even in America women entrepreneurs face challenges.

Janet Cronick:

Women's issues is not just in North America; it's really throughout the world. I personally have been part of starting an organization in Orange County, in California. I'm co-founder of the National Latina Businesswomen Association of Orange County, and people ask me the same question — why did you guys start an organization specifically for women? And one of the things that we tell people is it's different when you have the support of your peers and not because you feel that you're a victim. I think that's where it needs to start — you can't think of yourselves as a victim. But, realistically, we do face issues. We need to establish that credibility. Historically, if a man starts a business, it is easier for them to say, well, this is a “business-MAN.” You know, the term “business-WOMAN,” — think about it — it's normal. But twenty, twenty-five years ago, “business woman” — it was a new term in our vocabulary. So I think we are making progress. We're definitely not there yet, but I think we have made some positive changes, and that's what we have shared here with the women that have attended the conference from Latin America.

(music fade out)

Narrator:

The U.S. State Department's Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Melanne Verveer, inspired conference participants with her speech. She stressed the importance of networks, mentors, and the concept of "paying it forward" — that women entrepreneurs need to support each other as they create businesses and opportunities. As one envoy noted, it is time to realize the untapped potential of the "collective power of women." Part of the challenge for women entrepreneurs is managing issues such as a work-family life balance while also generating income, and creating businesses in traditionally male-dominated roles. Janet Cronick is from California and participated as a mentor in the Pathways to Prosperity conference.

Janet Cronick:

You know, it's funny, because the same issues resonate — whether it's Latin America or here in the U.S., we pretty much face the same issues. Some of the common themes are access to capital, obviously; when they're starting a business or wanting to grow a business, access to capital is usually the number one concern. Technical assistance — how to write a business plan — a lot of times, not just in Latin America, even here in the U.S., people go into business without planning it. And that's an issue that I personally talk about during my workshops when I travel. We need to take the time to plan. One of the things I see when people tell me, "Well, here we start businesses because it's a need, not because it's a luxury." And I say, "I understand that, but keep in mind that most businesses fail because they lacked a plan. And if you take the time to a little market research whether your product is needed, whether there is a market for your products, then I think you have a better chance."

Theresa Daytner:

My name is Theresa Daytner, and my company is Daytner Construction Group, and we do all commercial construction.

Narrator:

Theresa Daytner is president and CEO of Daytner Construction Group in Maryland. She's a true entrepreneur, having started several businesses ranging from roofing to tax planning. Daytner talked to us about risk, and why women entrepreneurs' conferences like Access are so valuable.

Theresa Daytner:

Risk has a lot of different definitions. I think every woman who's come from another country here has taken some amount of risk that their life is going to change dramatically, and are they willing to stand up to either old stereotypes, face their own guilt, or whatever it is. I think risk — it gets some pretty broad definitions. I think it's very personal, because my own perspective is there's always option B, option C, option D. I look at risk — some people would make that a very large part of their decision-making, and I minimize that, and so that's the way that I tend to operate with most of my decisions, is put it in its place. Our reactions to risk have to be appropriate, and if we're constantly responding in a big way to small things, then I think we have to change the way we're prioritizing where we put our energy.

Narrator:

Conferences like Pathways to Prosperity's Access are a great way to help aspiring entrepreneurs succeed by sharing ways to manage these types of issues. For every entrepreneur, risk can come from cultural attitudes toward women in business, access to educational and financial resources, or any other number of sources. Bringing together experienced businesswomen with aspiring entrepreneurs results in useful knowledge being passed forward. Theresa Daytner's business is in construction, which in America, is traditionally a male-dominated industry.

Theresa Daytner:

The sector and service or product is, yes, typically male-dominated. However, the issues of running a business are very similar, whether you're talking about agriculture or retail or wholesale, food products; and again from that perspective, there are many more similarities than there are differences in terms of small business operation. So I've been less focused on what we do and more focused on why we're doing and how we do it. And so there are a lot of parallels. When you talk about women entrepreneurs, we share a lot of the same issues. Some of those are cultural stigmas of being a woman and being a leader, and trying to manage and balance a life and family with the work that we do.

Narrator:

Maria Pacheco from Guatemala.

Maria Pacheco:

First, I think it's the idea of looking at things differently and just really taking ourselves more seriously. I think as entrepreneurs sometimes we feel like we don't need to grow up, so I'm taking that part of really improving as a general manager, of how it's more about leadership and what you do as a leader for your team and work with your team and empower your team and believe, and make them believe in themselves. And it's been great at this conference just to see things that you think, "Oh maybe it's just me," and when you see the trend you can say "Ok, this is something I have to value, like intuition," so I'm taking back many things, so it's been great at all levels.

Narrator:

Janet Cronick from California.

Janet Cronick:

So you know it is a struggle, but one step at a time, sharing my experience with them and letting them know that we face the same struggles that they face, whether it's Colombia, Bogota, Argentina, Dominican Republic, whatever it may be. We pretty much face the same issues here, here in the U.S. as well.

(music fade out)

Narrator:

Entrepreneurs have many resources where they can find information on how to run a business. But despite the enormous amount of resources, only experience can truly give entrepreneurs the wisdom they need to succeed. This is where the role of mentor programs are most valuable. A mentor serves as a trusted adviser to new entrepreneurs. The mentor-mentee relationship is special because it develops over a period of time. It involves the transfer of decision-making principles and other insight into business that cannot be learned in school. The learning is in fact a two-way process; mentors develop new ideas, give back to their community, and develop their management and consulting skills. Maria Echavarria from Colombia.

Marcela Echavarria:

I actually believe very strongly in the principle of mentorship, and the reason is because that's how the artisanal world operates. For example, what we have in Colombia, is we have a whole network of clusters led by master artisans who are mentoring ex-combatants of Colombia's peace process. And we have found that their relationship at the personal level – it's key. I mean, you're sharing, and you're partnering, and also because it's a very lonely journey to be an

entrepreneur, so I don't see it as me being a mentor. I'm actually so happy to be in a network and to share, to be able to discuss parts of the journey that just aren't possible to discuss with people who haven't tried it.

Narrator:

Theresa Daytner from Maryland in the United States.

Theresa Daytner:

I think obviously there's a lot of maybe co-learning between the mentors and the mentees and everybody in the room; we're all able to share with each other. But I think it's going to be a two-way process. The learning from also the panelists and the envoys is just incredible. Because sometimes there are things you've learned before that we forget, and it's nice to step away from our business and take that time to try and remove the — whatever limiting factors are keeping us from reaching our goals, and remove the emotion and detach yourself somewhat from your business so that you look at it from a totally different perspective. And that's what I think this conference has allowed me the opportunity to do. I'm so proud of some of these women and where they've come from that it inspires me to try harder.

Narrator:

Some of the entrepreneurs visited other cities in the United States to observe successful businesses run by women. All of the mentorships will be continued for one year. During that time, the mentors will visit their partners in their home countries to provide further support. A Pathways to Prosperity Web site has also been established, where entrepreneurs can interact online to support the long-term development of a businesswomen's network throughout the Pathways countries. Maria Pacheco from Guatemala.

Maria Pacheco:

I'm paired with a Guatemalan woman who is doing organic composts. I was an organic farmer myself for 12 years so I was really happy. But I think what I liked about it the most is that, as entrepreneurs, I think we dream of this amazing world, but at the beginning when you're on your own, you think you have to do it all yourself. And then you meet young people like the women we've met, and it's just young people come with a different — they're really thinking about the environment, about communities, about how to make a better country, so it's beautiful to watch these women and say, if there's a way in which what I have gone through can also help her, mostly believe in herself and in her dream to really pursue it.

Narrator:

This podcast is produced by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of International Information Programs. Links to other Internet sites or opinions expressed should not be considered an endorsement of other content and views.